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Age of Innocence

THE REBIRTH OF IRON MAN®

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THE REBIRTH OF IRON MAN

The sun is setting on this age of heroes.

One of the first and finest among them has fallen to the shadows of the dusk. Darkness has claimed their best and brightest--a gleaming beacon in the gloom--the Golden Avenger known as Iron Man.

But the dawn of a new day, a new age--an age of innocence--beckons Tony Stark . . .

. . . if he can only survive the night.

Age of Innocence

THE REBIRTH OF IRON MAN

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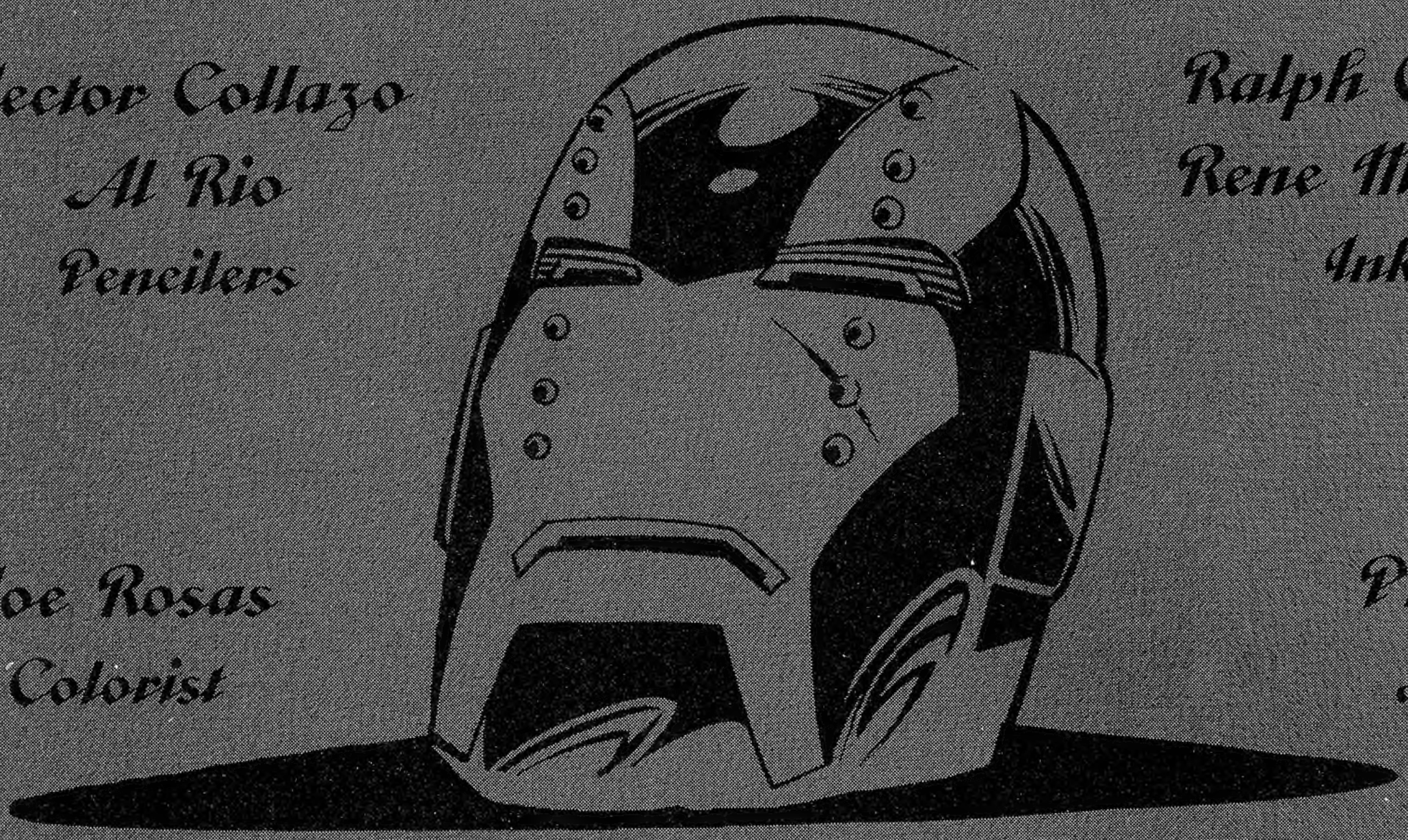

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...AND THE FADING BEAT OF HIS OWN HEART.

THE LAST SOUNDS HE HEARS ARE THE BRITTLE SNAPPING OF RIBS, THE GURGLE OF BLOOD AND BILE RISING IN HIS THROAT...

THE LAST FACE HE SEES IS HIS OWN, TWISTED BEYOND RECOGNITION BY HATRED AND FEAR.

YOUNG TONY STARK SENSES RATHER THAN SEES THE FINAL FATE OF THE MAN HE WOULD NEVER LIVE TO BE.

BA-DOOM!

BA-DOOM!

HE FEELS THE PRESENCE OF HIS WOULD-BE SAVIORS --

--FRIENDS AND FAMILY HE HAS YET TO TRULY KNOW--

BA-DOOM!

--BEFORE THE DARKNESS TAKES WHAT'S LEFT OF HIM.

BA-DOOM!

BUT EVEN NOW, SOMEHOW...

...TONY UNDERSTANDS THAT THEY ARE WITH HIM STILL.

EVEN AS YESTERDAY REPEATS ITSELF OVER AND OVER AGAIN IN HIS MIND, TODAY PLAYS OUT BELOW HIM.

HE WATCHES FROM A DISTANCE, IT SEEMS, DISASSOCIATED FROM THE SCENE OF CONTROLLED CHAOS ON THE FLOOR OF THE OPERATING THEATER.

ARTIFICIAL VALVE-PUMPS ARE OPERATIONAL...

CHEST-PLATE'S UP AND RUNNING.

LIFE-SUPPORT'S OFF-LINE...

THE DOCTORS AND NURSES WORK FEVERISHLY, DESPERATELY STRUGGLING TO SAVE A LIFE THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN LOST ALREADY IF NOT FOR THEIR VALIANT EFFORTS.

FORCED TO RESORT TO DANGEROUSLY UNCONVENTIONAL MEASURES AND MEANS TO KEEP A BROKEN BODY ALIVE...

...LONG ENOUGH TO HEAL A SHATTERED SOUL.

IN THE HANDS OF THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST IN THEIR RESPECTIVE FIELDS--RANGING FROM EXPERIMENTAL LASER-SURGERY TO ADVANCED ELECTRONICS ENGINEERING--

--INCLUDING DR. HENRY PYM, BIOCHEMIST EXTRAORDINAIRE.

I'M SORRY, AVENGERS.

HANK...?

WE'VE DONE ALL WE CAN...

...THE REST IS UP TO TONY.

THEIR SILENCE SPEAKS VOLUMES.

EACH AND EVERY GATHERED HERO SAVES HIS STRENGTH FOR THE ONE AMONG THEM WHO NEEDS IT MOST, GIVING ALL THEY'VE GOT TO THEIR FALLEN COMRADE...

...TRUSTING IN A PROVIDENCE THEY FEAR HAS FORSAKEN THEM.

BUT ONE MAN--AND ONE MAN ALONE--NEVER ALLOWS HIMSELF TO DOUBT...

...AND HIS FAITH IS EVENTUALLY REWARDED, IN ITS WAY.

DR. PYM...?

STILL NO CHANGE, JARVIS.

HE'S *YOUNG*, AND WAS IN GOOD PHYSICAL CONDITION BEFORE THE...INJURY. HIS RIBS ARE HEALING NICELY, THERE'S NO INDICATION OF PERMANENT DAMAGE TO THE LUNGS...

...AND HIS BODY HASN'T REJECTED ITS NEW *PLASTIC-AND-STEEL HEART* SO FAR.

WITH A FEW MINOR *MODIFICATIONS* TO COMPENSATE FOR THE *EXTREMITY* OF THE SITUATION, THE *CARDIO-VASCULAR CHEST-PLATE'S* PERFORMING THE JOB STARK DESIGNED IT TO DO ORIGINALLY.

IN THE END, TONY'S OWN *GENIUS* MAY JUST BE THE X-FACTOR THAT SAVES HIS LIFE.

ALL THAT SAID, NEW *INFECTIONS* ARE CROPPING UP AS QUICKLY AS WE COMBAT THE OLD ONES. AND HE'S NOT SHOWING ANY SIGNS OF IMPROVE-MENT.

HE'S SURVIVED THE *CRITICAL* STAGE, BUT THERE'S NO WAY TO PREDICT WHEN--OR EVEN *IF*--HE'LL COME OUT OF THIS COMA.

MEANWHILE, THE *AUTO-MED'S* MONITORING HIS EVERY BODILY FUNCTION...

...AND YOU CAN'T WAIT HERE *FOR-EVER*, OLD FRIEND.

THAT CASE, JARVIS, I'M PRESCRIBING *SOME COMPANY* FOR YOU BOTH...

...DOCTOR'S ORDERS.

WHOOSH

NO DIS-RESPECT INTENDED, DR. PYM--

--BUT IF THAT'S HOW LONG IT *TAKES*...

MR. AND MRS. HOGAN--!?

PEPPER AND HAPPY, JARV...

THE THREE OF US GO BACK WAY TOO FAR FOR FORMALITIES NOW, DON'T YOU THINK...?

OF COURSE, MR. HAPPY.

I CAN'T THANK YOU ENOUGH FOR COMING TO VISIT-- BOTH OF YOU--

--FOR *REMEMBERING* THE MASTER STARK WE ALL KNEW AND LOVED, DESPITE WHAT HE... WHAT HE...

JARVIS-- EDWIN--

WE'D BOTH LIKE THAT VERY MUCH, I'M SURE.

MAKE YOURSELF COMFORTABLE, MS. PEPPER. IT'S GOING TO BE AN AWFULLY *LONG* NIGHT...

--DO YOU MIND IF WE *STAY* AWHILE...?

SO STRANGE TO SEE HIM LIKE THIS, SO WEAK AND HELPLESS. SO VERY, VERY FRAGILE...

I STILL RECALL ANOTHER ANTHONY STARK--NOT TOO MANY YEARS OLDER THAN THIS--

"--WHO FAIRLY REEKED OF STRENGTH AND CONFIDENCE WHEREVER HE WENT.

"LEAST THAT'S HOW HE ALWAYS SEEMED TO US GIRLS IN THE EARLY DAYS--MOST OF US BARELY OUT OF OUR TEENS--

"--IN THE STARK INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAL POOL.

"ALL ACTIVITY--OF THE *BUSINESS* KIND, THAT IS--GROUND TO A SCREECHING HALT WHENEVER TONY CAME ONTO THE FLOOR.

"LIKE THE DAY WE FIRST *MET* FACE-TO-FACE."

BACK TO WORK, EVERYONE.

EXCEPT FOR THE PERSON OR PERSONS WHO TYPED UP THIS *GOVERNMENT CONTRACT PROPOSAL*--FOR THE A-12 ARTILLERY TRANSPORTS--

TEK TEK TEK

TEK TEK

BUT I WAS ONLY *CORRECTING* A COMPUTATION ERROR I CAUGHT WHILE TRANSPORTING THE--

AND WOULD YOU ALSO BE THE ONE WHO *FORWARDED* A COPY TO MY DESK FOR APPROVAL...?

--AND TOOK IT UPON THEMSELVES TO *ADJUST* THE FIGURES BEFORE I WENT TO NEGOTIATION.

AND YOU WOULD BE...?

Um, EXCUSE ME, SIR...?

I THINK THAT WOULD BE ME.

PEPPER POTTS.

GUILTY AS CHARGED, SIR.

THEN AS OF THIS MOMENT, YOUNG LADY, YOU SHOULD HERE-BY REGARD YOURSELF...

...AS MY PERSONAL EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT.

PROMOTION EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY.

AND CONSIDERING THE FACT THAT YOU MAY WELL HAVE *SAVED* THIS COMPANY OVER A HALF-MILLION DOLLARS IN UNDER-VALUED MATERIALS--

--YOUR NEW POSITION COMES WITH AN EXTREMELY HEFTY *RAISE.*

OH--

--YESSSSS!

STARK

STARK

"GUESS I CAME INTO THE PICTURE SHORTLY AFTER THAT, PEP...

"...BUT WHO COULDA BELIEVED THAT EITHER ONE O'US WOULDA ENDED UP HOBNOBBIN' AROUND *AVENGERS MANSION* A FEW YEARS LATER?

AFTER ALL, *HAPPY HOGAN* STARTED OUT AS NOTHIN' MORE THAN A PUG-UGLY BOXER WITH A LOSIN' STREAK LONGER THAN MY REACH.

NO REAL *FUTURE* TO SPEAK OF...

...'FORE I HOOKED UP WITH EVERYBODY'S FAVORITE BILLIONAIRE PLAYBOY INDUSTRIALIST.

'COURSE, EVEN I WASN'T EXACTLY PRIVY TO ALL O' THE BOSS'S SECRETS RIGHT OFF...

"...BUT TONY EVENTUALLY GOT *AROUND* TO TELLIN' ME WHAT'D BEEN *GOIN'* THROUGH HIS *MIND* THAT *MORNIN'*."

Hmmm... IF I KEEP UP THIS PACE, I'LL NOT ONLY WIN EVERY LAP, BUT SET A NEW TRACK RECORD!

VRRM

OHHH... I FEEL A TERRIBLE SQUEEZING PAIN IN MY CHEST! M-MUST BE MY HEART!

IN MY ANXIETY TO GET TO THE TRACK, I-I FORGOT TO RECHARGE MY METAL CHEST PLATE!

:GASP!:

NOW THERE ISN'T ENOUGH ELECTRICAL ENERGY IN IT TO KEEP MY HEART PUMPING!

SOMETHING'S WRONG WITH THE STARK SPECIAL! STARK SEEMS TO BE WRITHING IN AGONY!

VRRRM

STARK'S LOSING CONTROL OF THE CAR! IT'S SKIDDING UP THE EMBANKMENT!

WHAMM

CRASH

STARK'S A GONER! HE'S PINNED INSIDE THE CAR!

DON'T GO NEAR THE WRECK! IT'S AFIRE! IT'LL BLOW UP ANY MOMENT!

BUT THERE'S SOMEONE *INSIDE!* CAN'T JUST *LEAVE* 'IM THERE! MEBBE I CAN PULL 'IM OUT!

BUT WHEN THE... FLAMES HIT THE *GAS* TANK...

LOOK, BUB... I'M SCARED *ENOUGH* WITHOUT ANY HELP FROM *YOU!* SO CLAM UP AND LET'S GET *OUT* OF HERE, HUH?

VA-

BOOOM!

TOO BAD NO *BOOKIE* WAS AROUND! HE WOULD'VE GIVEN ME 10-TO-1 I'D BE STRUMMIN' A HARP NOW!

"REFUSING HIS REWARD TURNED OUT TO BE THE SMARTEST THING I EVER DONE.

"INSTEAD O' CHARITY..."

I COULD USE A *CHAUFFEUR*, HAPPY! IF YOU *WANT* IT, THE JOB'S YOURS!

NOW YOU'RE TALKIN'! A NICE, QUIET SAFE JOB... NO BROKEN NOSES... NO KNOCKOUT PUNCHES!

"SHOWS WHAT I KNEW...

... TURNED OUT TO BE THE *TOUGHEST* WORK I EVER TOOK ON, IN SOME WAYS.

AND THE VERY BEST, IN *ALL* WAYS.

MORE WORTHWHILE THAN ANYTHIN' I COULDA POSSIBLY IMAGINED.

YOU COULDN'T KNOW HOW MUCH YOU MEANT TO HIM ALSO, MISTER HAPPY.

THERE WAS SO MUCH THAT *NO ONE* ELSE KNEW ABOUT THOSE EARLY TIMES...

... THOSE DARK DAYS AND NIGHTS WHEN DEATH WAS A *CONSTANT COMPANION* TO MASTER ANTHONY.

THERE WERE SO MANY DISTRACTIONS THEN, HE WAS UNDER *SO MUCH PRESSURE* -- FROM WITHOUT AND WITHIN --

--HE *NEEDED* FRIENDS LIKE YOU AROUND HIM, TWO HE COULD TRUST TO PICK UP HIS SLACK.

"YOU MUST UNDERSTAND, THE *MUNITIONS MANUFACTURING* NEVER CAME AS EASILY AS HE MADE IT SEEM.

"IT'S JUST THAT HE WAS *SO GOOD* AT IT--*SO GOOD* AT EVERYTHING HE PUT HIS MIND TO, IN FACT--

"--AND THE DEMAND WAS SO GREAT,"

"AND SO..."

TAKE COVER! THERE'S THE ENEMY! YOU'LL SEE YOUR GUNS IN ACTION NOW!

THAT'S WHY I WAS SENT HERE! TO MAKE SURE THEY WORK AS WELL AS PLANNED! IF NOT, I'LL FIX 'EM ON THE--

OUR HEAVY ARTILLERY COULD BEAT THEM, BUT WE CAN'T TRANSPORT SUCH BIG WEAPONS THROUGH THE DENSE JUNGLE!

THANKS TO YOUR INVENTIONS, OUR MORTARS ARE NO LARGER OR HEAVIER THAN FLASHLIGHTS! OUR MEN CAN CARRY THEM ANYWHERE!

A BOOBY-TRAP! Ohhh...

KLTCH

BA-

-BOOM

<YANKEE CIVILIAN STILL ALIVE!>

<HOW IS HE?>

<BAD! MUCH SHRAPNEL NEAR HIS HEART!>

<WE KNOW YOU ARE AMERICAN WEAPONS INVENTOR! IF YOU DESIGN POWERFUL NEW WEAPON FOR ME, AFTERWARDS I HAVE SURGEON SAVE YOUR LIFE!>

"THEY LIED, OF COURSE...

"...BUT SO DID THE RE-KNOWNED PHYSICIST FORCED INTO SERVITUDE ALONGSIDE HIM."

"ULTIMATELY, PROFESSOR YINSEN PAID A TRAGIC PRICE FOR BETRAY-ING THEIR CAPTORS.

BRAAAPI

THE LIFE-GIVING HEART OF YOUR IRON BODY IS READY!

"IRONICALLY THOUGH, THE REVITALIZING CHEST PUMP THAT HE AND MASTER ANTHONY HAD CREATED TOGETHER DID DOUBLE AS A WEAPON--

"--AN ENTIRE *WEAPONS-SYSTEM*, ACTUALLY, UN-LIKE ANY EVER SEEN BEFORE--

"--THE INCOMPARABLE *ARMOR* AND *ARMORY* OF *IRON MAN*.

"FIRST AND FOREMOST, THE *ARMAMENT* WAS AN *ARSENAL OF VENGEANCE* FOR THOSE WHO HAD BUILT IT--AND THE FINAL *DOWNFALL* OF THOSE WHO HAD *COMMISSIONED* IT--

"...IN THE END, HOWEVER, IT WAS TRULY A *LIFE-SAVER* FOR ANTHONY STARK."

MISSED YOU MORE THAN I EXPECTED WHILE YOU WERE PRISONER IN THAT HORRIBLE HELL-HOLE, TONY.

I COULDN'T STOP *THINKING* ABOUT YOU, WONDERING WHAT YOU WERE GOING THROUGH--

AND I'M STILL NOT QUITE READY TO *TALK* ABOUT IT JUST YET, JOANNA...

...BUT *SOMEDAY SOON*, I PROMISE.

I HOPE.

...NOT AGAIN.

WELL, LOVER, THERE'S NO REASON WE HAVE TO SAY GOODNIGHT *SO EARLY*...

...NOT DOWN HERE, AT LEAST.

NOW THAT WE'RE *ENGAGED* TO BE--

ER... MAYBE *TOMORROW*, HON.

I'VE GOT SO MUCH PAPER-WORK TO CATCH UP ON SINCE COMING HOME, SO MANY PHONE CALLS LEFT TO RETURN...

TONY--?!

TONY STARK, DON'T YOU *DARE* DO THIS TO ME...

I'M *SO SORRY*, JOANNA. YOU'LL NEVER KNOW HOW *MUCH*, REALLY.

IT'S CERTAINLY *NOT* WHAT I WANT TO DO...

...IT'S JUST WHAT I *HAVE* TO DO.

MMM

"THAT WAS ONLY THE *FIRST* RELATIONSHIP TO SUFFER FOR STARK'S SECRETS...

...HARDLY THE LAST.

I'M GUESSIN' IT WAS THE ONLY REASON THE MRS. HERE EVER EVEN GAVE ME A SECOND LOOK.

NOT TRUE, MR. HOGAN, AND YOU KNOW IT.

MY ONE-SIDED CRUSH ON TONY WAS INFATUATION, AT MOST. JUST MY WAY OF SAVING MYSELF FOR YOU, PROBABLY...

...AND IF YOU TAKE ME HOME RIGHT NOW, I'LL PROVE IT. AGAIN.

AND AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN, IF I CAN HELP IT.

KLIK

THEY'RE EMBARRASSING JARVIS.

THEN WHY ARE YOU THE ONE WHO'S BLUSHIN', BOY SCOUT...?

FACT IS, HAWKEYE, TONY DIDN'T REQUIRE THE CHEST-PLATE FOREVER...

...MEDICAL SCIENCE EVENTUALLY CAUGHT UP TO HIS NEEDS.

IN OTHER WORDS, CONSIDER THE SUBJECT CHANGED...?

OKAY, SURE, THE DOCS WERE FINALLY ABLE TO PERFORM A HEART-TRANSPLANT-- NOT TO MENTION, CURIN' A SERIOUS CASE OF PARAPLEGIA MORE RECENTLY--

--BUT THAT NEVER STOPPED STARK FROM MESSIN' WITH THE IRON MAN ARMOR.

TINKERIN' WITH IT CONSTANTLY, REDESIGNIN' IT FOR EVERY NEW SITUATION THAT CAME DOWN THE PIKE.

MAYBE IF HE'D JUST HUNG IT OUT TO DRY ONCE AND FOR ALL...

IF HE *HAD*, CLINT...

...HE WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN HERE FOR US EACH AND EVERY TIME WE NEEDED HIM.

KLK

ALONGSIDE ALMOST EVERY TEAM OF AVENGERS IN OUR HISTORY, UP AGAINST ALL THE MAJOR PLAYERS IN THE FIELD--

--FROM OUR FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH *LOKI* TO OUR FINAL BATTLE WITH *KORVAC*--

--FROM THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH TO THE FARTHEST REACHES OF SPACE.

THAT'S ALL WELL AND GOOD, CAP-- THERE'S NO DENYIN' THE HERO TONY WAS IN HIS DAY--

--BUT THERE'S NO ESCAPIN' THE *MONSTER* HE BECAME, EITHER.

KLK

STARK INDISCRIMINATELY *MURDERED* AT LEAST THREE OF OUR OWN--

--INDIRECTLY *PARTICIPATED* IN THE BRUTAL DEATHS OF TWO OTHERS THAT WE KNOW OF--

"...AND FOREVER CHANGED THE LIFE OF ONE OF HIS OLDEST FRIENDS."

"...KANG AND MANTIS--AND THEIR CURSED FAMILY OF WARRIORS--WERE THE ROOT OF THE TROUBLE."

"I'LL GIVE YOU THAT, STEVE...

"...BUT HANK WAS ABLE TO RESIST THOSE SAME INFLUENCES, WASN'T HE?

"HE STRUGGLED AGAINST THEM UNTIL IT *BROKE* HIM--DROVE HIM STRAIGHT INTO A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN, APPARENTLY--BUT HE *NEVER* SUCCUMBED TO THEIR CORRUPTION.

"TONY CHOSE TO FIGHT *US* INSTEAD...

"ALL TOO TRUE, HAWK. BUT THE *ARMOR WASN'T* THE CAUSE, WE KNOW THAT NOW...

"--EVERY STEP OF THE WAY, IN *EVERY* WAY POSSIBLE--"

"--TO THE DEATH, LITERALLY."

"I SUSPECT TONY WAS HIS *OWN* WORST ENEMY FROM THE START, HAWK...

"...AND HE PROVED IT BEYOND A SHADOW OF A DOUBT IN THE END."

"EXACTLY WHAT I'M SAYING, CAP. WAY I SEE IT, THE CONQUEROR AND THE VAMP WERE THE *LEAST* OF HIS PROBLEMS...

"...STARK *ALWAYS* HAD A CONTROL PROBLEM. WHEN HE WASN'T ABUSING IT, HE WAS LOSING IT.

LET'S NOT FORGET HIS *ALCOHOLISM*, OR HIS WINNING WAY WITH--

WEAKNESS IS *NOT* A SIN, CLINT.

MAYBE NOT, BUT IT'S *DANGEROUS*.

AND I, FOR ONE, INTEND TO DO WHATEVER IT TAKES TO MAKE SURE THAT THIS TONY DOESN'T *REPEAT* HIS SAME MISTAKES...

IN THE SILENCE OF THE MED-LAB, A GREY SHADOW SLIPS THROUGH BLACK.

A HISS OF GAS ESCAPES THE HUSH--BARELY A BREATH, REALLY--

--AND A LOYAL MAN FINALLY SLEEPS.

REMEMBER ME, LOVER...?

KATHY DARE, THE WOMAN WHO BROKE YOU ONCE.

BROKE YOUR BACK, WHEN YOU BROKE MY HEART.

NO...?

TOO LATE IN YOUR LIFE TO RING ANY BELLS?

HOW ABOUT ME...

...MEREDITH McCALL?

YOUR FIRST LOVE.

THE FIRST GIRL YOU ABANDONED.

ALREADY A PART OF YOUR LIFE WHEN YOU WERE "BROUGHT FORWARD" TO THIS TIME, TO HERE AND NOW.

NO REASON YOU SHOULDN'T KNOW ME, TONY.

NO EXCUSE.

WHAT ABOUT JANICE CORD, THE INNOCENT WHO DIED IN IRON MAN'S ARMS...?

IGNORANT OF YOUR SECRETS TO THE END.

GRETL ANDERS, WHO DIED IN TONY STARK'S ARMS...? A FRIEND WHEN YOU HAD NONE.

NOTHING, BOY...

...NOT EVEN A *SPARK* OF RECOGNITION?

DR. SU YIN, WHO SAVED YOUR LIFE?

WHITNEY FROST, WHO CHANGED IT FOREVER...?

BETHANY CABE, THE LATEST AND LAST TO FALL TO YOUR CONSIDERABLE CHARMS?

TOO MANY FOR YOU TO RE-CALL, TONY...

...OR NOT ENOUGH FEELING TO *CARE*?

ALL THE WOMEN YOU WERE *MEANT* TO HAVE LOVED--

--AND LOST--

--JUST A LITTLE GET-WELL GIFT FROM *MASQUE*.

YOU'VE *DISAPPOINTED* ALL OF US IN YOUR TIME, BUT YOU HAVE A SECOND CHANCE NOW...

...DON'T *DARE* DO IT AGAIN.

HI THERE, BIG BOY.

LITTLE DARK IN HERE, DON'T YOU THINK?

LET'S SEE IF WE CAN DO SOMETHING ABOUT THAT...

...MAYBE LIGHT UP YOUR LIFE A BIT.

BETTER.

BADOOM BADOOM BADOOM

MUCH BETTER FROM WHERE I'M STANDING.

ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN, THAT IS.

WAY OUTSIDE--

--AS IN AROUND THE CORNER, AND HALFWAY DOWN THE BLOCK--

BADOOM BADOOM BADOOM

--LOOKING ALL THE WAY IN.

MARIANNE RODGERS HERE, TONY, IN CASE THE TELEPATHY ISN'T A DEAD...

SORRY, BAD CHOICE OF THOUGHTS.

FORGIVE THE INTRUSION, WHILE WE'RE AT IT...

...BUT I'M DETERMINED TO SEE FOR MYSELF IF THE POISONOUS INFECTION THAT ALL BUT DESTROYED US BOTH IS TRULY OUT OF THE PICTURE.

LOOKS LIKE YOU DON'T HAVE MUCH ELSE ON YOUR MIND AT THE MOMENT-- UNDERSTANDABLE, CONSIDERING THE CIRCUMSTANCES--

--SO LET'S JUST GET STRAIGHT TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER.

LITTLE *NERVOUS* ABOUT WHAT I MAY FIND IN HERE, TO TELL THE TRUTH.

BADOOM

CAN'T QUITE FORGET WHAT IT DID TO ME LAST TIME AROUND.

BADOOM

CERTAINLY *SOUNDS* LIKE THE SAME OLD YOU SO FAR, TONY.

A LIFEBEAT THAT'S VIRTUALLY *UNSTOPPABLE*, LOUDER AND CLEARER THAN ANY OTHER I'VE EVER KNOWN.

BADOOM

AND A PATH TO THE CORE OF YOUR SOUL THAT'S JUST AS *COMPLEX*, WEBBED WITH ENOUGH TWISTS AND TURNS TO LOSE THE SUREST OF--

NO.

EXACTLY WHAT I WAS AFRAID OF...

BADOOM BADOOM BADOOM

...THE SAME *GAPING WOUNDS* AND *RAW NERVES*, WALLS STILL STRETCHED THIN TO THE POINT OF BREAKING.

AND *BLOOD* SPILLING EVERYWHERE, GOING NOWHERE.

YET...

IT IS *YOURS*, AT LEAST.

PUREST RED AND WHOLLY HUMAN.

WITHOUT A *TRACE* OF THE BLACK BILE OF KANG OR MANTIS.

AND I CAN'T HELP BUT BE PLEASED TO WATCH WHAT'S LEFT OF YOUR BROKEN HEART CONSTANTLY FIGHTING TO *HEAL* ITSELF...

...DESPITE THE DAMAGE DONE FROM WITHOUT AND WITHIN.

ALL THE SAME STRENGTHS AND DREAMS AND HOPES THAT MADE TONY STARK A *HERO* IN THE FIRST PLACE.

'BYE FOR NOW, TONY.

BUT THE MORE THINGS *CHANGE*...

...THE MORE THEY REMAIN THE SAME.

--HOW FAR INSIDE YOU RUN TO HIDE--

--YOU CAN-NOT ESCAPE DESTINY.

CYCLES OF PLEASURE AND PAIN YET TO COME.

NO MATTER WHAT YOU DO, YOUNG TONY STARK--

A DANCE WITH DEATH AND DANGER.

SHARED BY FRIENDS...

...AND FOES.

TAKE THIS FELLOW WEAPONS-DESIGNER--COMPETITOR IN YOUR OWN FIELD ONCE--AND MOB ASSASSIN...

...BLACKLASH.

HE WON'T STAY IN PRISON FOREVER, YOU REALIZE...?

AND THE *ENDLESS* POWER OF THE *MANDARIN* NEVER DIES! OF COURSE.

EVEN THE SO-CALLED *JACK FROST* HAS A SUCCESSOR--ONE SO MUCH MORE THAN YOU COULD EVER *DREAM*.

INDUSTRIAL ESPIONAGE AGENTS LIKE THE *GHOST* COULD BE LURKING IN ANY AND EVERY SHADOW ALREADY.

EVEN THE WEAKENED *CONTROLLER* STILL HAS HIS OWN PLANS FOR THE MIND AND BODY OF THE MAN IN THE IRON MAN ARMOR.

THEY *ALL* DO, IN FACT.

EACH AND EVERY DEADLY ENEMY WHOSE SCHEMES HAVE BEEN THWARTED BY THE *GOLDEN AVENGER* OVER THE LONG YEARS--

--FROM THE FIRST TO FALL, TO THE MOST RECENT TO RISE--

--JUST *WAITING* FOR THEIR SHOT AT THIS *INEXPERIENCED AMATEUR* THAT LIES BEFORE ME.

BUT IN THE END...

"...YOU SHALL BE *MINE.*

YOU AND ALL YOU HOLD DEAR, STARK-- THOSE YOU LOVE AND THOSE WHO LOVE YOU--

--WILL KNOW MY FINAL *VENGEANCE.*

AND THE SINISTER SHADE IS GONE AS SUDDENLY AS HE APPEARED, VANISHED LIKE THE MERE HOLOGRAM HE WAS...

...YET THE EFFECT OF HIS PARTING WORDS--THREATS AGAINST SURVIVING FRIENDS AND FAMILY--IS CONSIDERABLY MORE CONCRETE THAN HIS PHYSICAL PRESENCE EVER WAS.

AFTER A LONG AND RESTLESS SLUMBER, YOUNG TONY STARK'S EYES FINALLY FLUTTER OPEN...

BEEPBEEPBEE

'MORNING... JARV...

...TO GREET THE *DAWNING* OF A NEW DAY.

EEEEEEEEEEP

...WHAT'D I MISS?

AND THE FUTURE HAS JUST BEGUN...